

## Old Allies, Tagged 'Terrorist'

By Anna Husarska

Saturday, December 16, 2006; A19

*Washington Post*

PHONSAVAN, Laos -- The United States has not had much luck in winning hearts and minds as it wages what President Bush calls the "war on terror." But it could at least make an effort to stand by those whose hearts and minds it won decades ago in other conflicts. Instead, it is turning its back on them.

The anti-terrorist laws introduced after Sept. 11, 2001, are keeping thousands of bona fide refugees from places around the world out the United States, on the grounds that their past participation in armed insurgencies, even those friendly to (and sometimes supported by) the United States, makes them a threat to American security. Perhaps no group is more harmed by this legislation -- with its absurdly broad definition of "terrorist activity" -- than the Hmong, a hill tribe of northern Laos.

Beginning in 1961, the Hmong were recruited by the CIA to halt the spread of communism in their country. The "secret war" waged here in northern Laos was a sideshow to the Vietnam conflict. The Hmong were the de facto ground forces in the U.S.-led air campaign.

And yet, unless Washington changes the legislation or issues a waiver, these former U.S. allies will never set foot in America. Unbelievable as it seems, their past heroic struggle on behalf of the CIA is now regarded as "terrorist activity."

I spoke to two dozen Hmong who fled from Laos to Bangkok in the past two years and who have been recognized as refugees by the U.N. refugee agency, UNHCR. Those old enough to have fought in the CIA's war stated their situation clearly: The United States had asked them to fight and supplied them with weapons, munitions, food and clothes. They were not part of any other group, terrorist or otherwise. They were part of the CIA.

In 1975, when the Communists won in Laos, the United States evacuated only the top officers, leaving most Hmong fighters behind. Fearing persecution and mistreatment by the victorious Pathet Lao, the Hmong felt they had two choices: hide in the mountains of northern Laos or flee across the Mekong to Thailand.

After the betrayal of 1975, the lobbying done by those already resettled and the Hmong's CIA mentors resulted in substantial redress: Between 1976 and 2005, about 153,000 Hmong came to the United States.

Many of those waiting in Bangkok to follow in their footsteps spent almost three decades living a primitive, secluded life in the jungle of northern Laos. They told me that a few thousand Hmong are still there. Little is known about their lives. Journalists who attempt to visit their hideouts --

a few days' walk from Phonsavan -- often end up being detained by Laotian authorities.

One former CIA recruit, Xo Chia Vue, 64, hopes that once he is reunited with his two brothers and his son in Fresno, Calif., he can meet the two American pilots he rescued in the 1970s and perhaps the family of the pilot whose remains he helped evacuate after his plane crashed into a mountain in 1971.

But Xo Chia Vue, who spent 14 years fighting for the CIA, is barred from the United States and, like all other such combatants, is considered a "terrorist." Those who provide "material support" to these combatants --for instance Xo Chia Vue's two granddaughters, who cooked for him in the jungle -- are subject to the same restrictions. This absurd law applies also to the Montagnards, Vietnamese allies of the U.S. Special Forces, now languishing in Cambodia. And -- theoretically -- it would seem to apply to those who helped overthrow Saddam Hussein.

The Bush administration has issued three waivers to this draconian law to allow some Burmese refugees into the United States. But waivers are partial solutions and are not available to those deemed "terrorists," only to "providers of material support."

As I spoke to Hmong refugees through a translator, I could sense their anger, even rage over this situation. "It is because I dedicated all my life to the Americans that now I have trouble," said Xo Chia Vue.

Here at least, American anti-terrorist legislation has served as a blueprint for losing hearts and minds.

The writer is senior policy adviser at the International Rescue Committee.